

Translations from the Asian Classics

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# CHUANG T'ZU



BASIC WRITINGS

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## AUTUMN FLOODS

(SECTION 17)

The time of the autumn floods came and the hundred streams poured into the Yellow River. Its racing current swelled to such proportions that, looking from bank to bank or island to island, it was impossible to distinguish a horse from a cow. Then the Lord of the River<sup>1</sup> was beside himself with joy, believing that all the beauty in the world belonged to him alone. Following the current, he journeyed east until at last he reached the North Sea. Looking east, he could see no end to the water.

The Lord of the River began to wag his head and roll his eyes. Peering far off in the direction of Jo,<sup>2</sup> he sighed and said, "The common saying has it, 'He has heard the Way a mere hundred times but he thinks he's better than anyone else.' It applies to me. In the past, I heard men belittling the learning of Confucius and making light of the righteousness of Po Yi,<sup>3</sup> though I never believed them. Now, however, I have seen your unfathomable vastness. If I hadn't come to your gate,<sup>4</sup> I should have been in danger. I should forever have been laughed at by the masters of the Great Method!"

<sup>1</sup> The Lord of the River, the god of the Yellow River, has already appeared on p. 78, under the name P'ing-i.

<sup>2</sup> The god of the sea.

<sup>3</sup> Po Yi, who relinquished his kingdom to his brother and later chose to die of starvation rather than serve a ruler he considered unjust, was regarded as a model of righteousness.

<sup>4</sup> The Lord of the River has literally come to the gate of the sea. But a second meaning is implied, that is, "If I hadn't become your disciple."

Jo of the North Sea said, "You can't discuss the ocean with a well frog—he's limited by the space he lives in. You can't discuss ice with a summer insect—he's bound to a single season. You can't discuss the Way with a cramped scholar—he's shackled by his doctrines. Now you have come out beyond your banks and borders and have seen the great sea—so you realize your own pettiness. From now on it will be possible to talk to you about the Great Principle.

"Of all the waters of the world, none is as great as the sea. Ten thousand streams flow into it—I have never heard of a time when they stopped—and yet it is never full. The water leaks away at Wei-lü<sup>5</sup>—I have never heard of a time when it didn't—and yet the sea is never empty. Spring or autumn, it never changes. Flood or drought, it takes no notice. It is so much greater than the streams of the Yangtze or the Yellow River that it is impossible to measure the difference. But I have never for this reason prided myself on it. I take my place with heaven and earth and receive breath from the yin and yang. I sit here between heaven and earth as a little stone or a little tree sits on a huge mountain. Since I can see my own smallness, what reason would I have to pride myself?"

"Compare the area within the four seas with all that is between heaven and earth—is it not like one little anthill in a vast marsh? Compare the Middle Kingdom with the area within the four seas—is it not like one tiny grain in a great storehouse? When we refer to the things of creation, we speak of them as numbering ten thousand—and man is only one of them. We talk of the Nine Provinces where men are most numerous, and yet of the whole area where grain and foods are grown and where boats and carts pass back and forth, man oc-

<sup>5</sup> Said by some commentators to be a huge fiery stone against which the sea water turns to steam.

cupies only one fraction.<sup>6</sup> Compared to the ten thousand things, is he not like one little hair on the body of a horse? What the Five Emperors passed along, what the Three Kings fought over, what the benevolent man grieves about, what the responsible man labors over—all is no more than this!<sup>7</sup> Po Yi gained a reputation by giving it up; Confucius passed himself off as learned because he talked about it. But in priding themselves in this way, were they not like you a moment ago priding yourself on your flood waters?"

"Well then," said the Lord of the River, "if I recognize the hugeness of heaven and earth and the smallness of the tip of a hair, will that do?"

"No indeed!" said Jo of the North Sea. "There is no end to the weighing of things, no stop to time, no constancy to the division of lots, no fixed rule to beginning and end. Therefore great wisdom observes both far and near, and for that reason recognizes small without considering it paltry, recognizes large without considering it unwieldy, for it knows that there is no end to the weighing of things. It has a clear understanding of past and present, and for that reason it spends a long time without finding it tedious, a short time without fretting at its shortness, for it knows that time has no stop. It perceives the nature of fullness and emptiness, and for that reason it does not delight if it acquires something nor worry if it loses it, for it knows that there is no constancy to the division of lots. It comprehends the Level Road, and for that reason it does not

<sup>6</sup> As it stands in the original, this sentence makes little sense to me, and the translation represents no more than a tentative attempt to extract some meaning.

<sup>7</sup> The Five Emperors were five legendary rulers of high antiquity, of whom the Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun are the most famous. The Three Kings were the founders of the Three Dynasties, the Hsia, the Shang, and the Chou.

rejoice in life nor look on death as a calamity, for it knows that no fixed rule can be assigned to beginning and end.

"Calculate what man knows and it cannot compare to what he does not know. Calculate the time he is alive and it cannot compare to the time before he was born. Yet man takes something so small and tries to exhaust the dimensions of something so large! Hence he is muddled and confused and can never get anywhere. Looking at it this way, how do we know that the tip of a hair can be singled out as the measure of the smallest thing possible? Or how do we know that heaven and earth can fully encompass the dimensions of the largest thing possible?"

The Lord of the River said, "Men who debate such matters these days all claim that the minutest thing has no form and the largest thing cannot be encompassed. Is this a true statement?"

Jo of the North Sea said, "If from the standpoint of the minute we look at what is large, we cannot see to the end. If from the standpoint of what is large we look at what is minute, we cannot distinguish it clearly. The minute is the smallest of the small, the gigantic is the largest of the large, and it is therefore convenient to distinguish between them. But this is merely a matter of circumstance. Before we can speak of coarse or fine, however, there must be some form. If a thing has no form, then numbers cannot express its dimensions, and if it cannot be encompassed, then numbers cannot express its size. We can use words to talk about the coarseness of things and we can use our minds to visualize the fineness of things. But what words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing—this has nothing to do with coarseness or fineness.

"Therefore the Great Man in his actions will not harm others, but he makes no show of benevolence or charity. He

will not move for the sake of profit, but he does not despise the porter at the gate. He will not wrangle for goods or wealth, but he makes no show of refusing or relinquishing them. He will not enlist the help of others in his work, but he makes no show of being self-supporting, and he does not despise the greedy and base. His actions differ from those of the mob, but he makes no show of uniqueness or eccentricity. He is content to stay behind with the crowd, but he does not despise those who run forward to flatter and fawn. All the titles and stipends of the age are not enough to stir him to exertion; all its penalties and censures are not enough to make him feel shame. He knows that no line can be drawn between right and wrong, no border can be fixed between great and small. I have heard it said, 'The Man of the Way wins no fame, the highest virtue<sup>8</sup> wins no gain, the Great Man has no self.' To the most perfect degree, he goes along with what has been allotted to him."

The Lord of the River said, "Whether they are external to things or internal, I do not understand how we come to have these distinctions of noble and mean or of great and small."

Jo of the North Sea said, "From the point of view of the Way, things have no nobility or meanness. From the point of view of things themselves, each regards itself as noble and other things as mean. From the point of view of common opinion, nobility and meanness are not determined by the individual himself.

"From the point of view of differences, if we regard a thing as big because there is a certain bigness to it, then among all the ten thousand things there are none that are not big. If we regard a thing as small because there is a certain smallness to it, then among the ten thousand things there are none that are not small. If we know that heaven and earth are tiny grains

<sup>8</sup> A play on the homophones *te* (virtue) and *te* (gain, or acquisition).

and the tip of a hair is a range of mountains, then we have perceived the law of difference.

"From the point of view of function, if we regard a thing as useful because there is a certain usefulness to it, then among all the ten thousand things there are none that are not useful. If we regard a thing as useless because there is a certain uselessness to it, then among the ten thousand things there are none that are not useless. If we know that east and west are mutually opposed but that one cannot do without the other, then we can estimate the degree of function.

"From the point of view of preference, if we regard a thing as right because there is a certain right to it, then among the ten thousand things there are none that are not right. If we regard a thing as wrong because there is a certain wrong to it, then among the ten thousand things there are none that are not wrong. If we know that Yao and Chieh each thought himself right and condemned the other as wrong, then we may understand how there are preferences in behavior.

"In ancient times Yao abdicated in favor of Shun and Shun ruled as emperor; K'uai abdicated in favor of Chih and Chih was destroyed.<sup>9</sup> T'ang and Wu fought and became kings; Duke Po fought and was wiped out.<sup>10</sup> Looking at it this way, we see that struggling or giving way, behaving like a Yao or like a Chieh, may be at one time noble and at another time mean. It is impossible to establish any constant rule.

"A beam or pillar can be used to batter down a city wall, but

<sup>9</sup> In 316 B.C. King K'uai of Yen was persuaded to imitate the example of Yao by ceding his throne to his minister Tzu Chih. In no time the state was torn by internal strife and three years later it was invaded and annexed by the state of Ch'i.

<sup>10</sup> T'ang and Wu were the founders of the Shang and Chou dynasties respectively. Duke Po was a scion of the royal family of Ch'u who led an unsuccessful revolt against its ruler and was defeated and forced to commit suicide in 479 B.C.

it is no good for stopping up a little hole—this refers to a difference in function. Thoroughbreds like Ch'i-chi and Hua-liu could gallop a thousand li in one day, but when it came to catching rats they were no match for the wildcat or the weasel—this refers to a difference in skill. The horned owl catches fleas at night and can spot the tip of a hair, but when daylight comes, no matter how wide it opens its eyes, it cannot see a mound or a hill—this refers to a difference in nature. Now do you say that you are going to make Right your master and do away with Wrong, or make Order your master and do away with Disorder? If you do, then you have not understood the principle of heaven and earth or the nature of the ten thousand things. This is like saying that you are going to make Heaven your master and do away with Earth, or make Yin your master and do away with Yang. Obviously it is impossible. If men persist in talking this way without stop, they must be either fools or deceivers!

"Emperors and kings have different ways of ceding their thrones; the Three Dynasties had different rules of succession. Those who went against the times and flouted custom were called usurpers; those who went with the times and followed custom were called companions of righteousness. Be quiet, O Lord of the River! How could you understand anything about the gateway of nobility and meanness or the house of great and small?"

"Well then," said the Lord of the River, "what should I do and what should I not do? How am I to know in the end what to accept and what to reject, what to abide by and what to discard?"

Jo of the North Sea said, "From the point of view of the Way, what is noble or what is mean? These are merely

what are called endless changes. Do not hobble your will, or you will be departing far from the Way! What is few, or what is many? These are merely what are called boundless turnings.<sup>11</sup> Do not strive to unify your actions, or you will be at sixes and sevens with the Way! Be stern like the ruler of a state—he grants no private favor. Be benign and impartial like the god of the soil at the sacrifice—he grants no private blessing. Be broad and expansive like the endlessness of the four directions—they have nothing which bounds or hedges them. Embrace the ten thousand things universally—how could there be one you should give special support to? This is called being without bent. When the ten thousand things are unified and equal, then which is short and which is long?

"The Way is without beginning or end, but things have their life and death—you cannot rely upon their fulfillment. One moment empty, the next moment full—you cannot depend upon their form. The years cannot be held off; time cannot be stopped. Decay, growth, fullness, and emptiness end and then begin again. It is thus that we must describe the plan of the Great Meaning and discuss the principles of the ten thousand things. The life of things is a gallop, a headlong dash—with every movement they alter, with every moment they shift. What should you do and what should you not do? Everything will change of itself, that is certain!"

"If that is so," said the Lord of the River, "then what is there valuable about the Way?"

Jo of the North Sea said, "He who understands the Way is certain to have command of basic principles. He who has com-

<sup>11</sup> I follow Fukunaga's interpretation of these terms.

mand of basic principles is certain to know how to deal with circumstances. And he who knows how to deal with circumstances will not allow things to do him harm. When a man has perfect virtue, fire cannot burn him, water cannot drown him, cold and heat cannot afflict him, birds and beasts cannot injure him. I do not say that he makes light of these things. I mean that he distinguishes between safety and danger, contents himself with fortune or misfortune, and is cautious in his comings and goings. Therefore nothing can harm him.

"Hence it is said: the Heavenly is on the inside, the human is on the outside. Virtue resides in the Heavenly. Understand the actions of Heaven and man, base yourself upon Heaven, take your stand in virtue,<sup>12</sup> and then, although you hasten or hold back, bend or stretch, you may return to the essential and speak of the ultimate."

"What do you mean by the Heavenly and the human?"

Jo of the North Sea said, "Horses and oxen have four feet—this is what I mean by the Heavenly. Putting a halter on the horse's head, piercing the ox's nose—this is what I mean by the human. So I say: do not let what is human wipe out what is Heavenly; do not let what is purposeful wipe out what is fated; do not let [the desire for] gain lead you after fame. Be cautious, guard it, and do not lose it—this is what I mean by returning to the True."

The K'uei<sup>13</sup> envies the millepede, the millepede envies the snake, the snake envies the wind, the wind envies the eye, and the eye envies the mind.

<sup>12</sup> Actually, the text reads "gain" (*te*); perhaps this is merely a mistake for the *te* meaning "virtue," or perhaps a play on the two words is intended. See above, p. 100, n. 8.

<sup>13</sup> A being with only one leg. Sometimes it is described as a spirit or a strange beast, sometimes as a historical personage—the Music Master K'uei.

The K'uei said to the millepede, "I have this one leg that I hop along on, though I make little progress. Now how in the world do you manage to work all those ten thousand legs of yours?"

The millepede said, "You don't understand. Haven't you ever watched a man spit? He just gives a hawk and out it comes, some drops as big as pearls, some as fine as mist, raining down in a jumble of countless particles. Now all I do is put in motion the heavenly mechanism in me—I'm not aware of how the thing works."

The millepede said to the snake, "I have all these legs that I move along on, but I can't seem to keep up with you who have no legs. How is that?"

The snake said, "It's just the heavenly mechanism moving me along—how can I change the way I am? What would I do with legs if I had them?"

The snake said to the wind, "I move my backbone and ribs and manage to get along, though I still have some kind of body. But now you come whirling up from the North Sea and go whirling off to the South Sea, and you don't seem to have any body. How is that?"

The wind said, "It's true that I whirl up from the North Sea and whirl off to the South Sea. But if you hold up a finger against me you've defeated me, and if you trample on me you've likewise defeated me. On the other hand, I can break down big trees and blow over great houses—this is a talent that I alone have. So I take all the mass of little defeats and make them into a Great Victory. To make a Great Victory—only the sage is capable of that!"

When Confucius was passing through K'uang, the men of Sung surrounded him with several encirclements of troops,

but he went right on playing his lute and singing without a stop.<sup>14</sup> Tzu Lu went in to see him and said, "Master, how can you be so carefree?"

Confucius said, "Come, I will explain to you. For a long time I have tried to stay out of the way of hardship. That I have not managed to escape it is due to fate. For a long time I have tried to achieve success. That I have not been able to do so is due to the times. If it happens to be the age of a Yao or a Shun, then there are no men in the world who face hardship—but this is not because their wisdom saves them. If it happens to be the age of a Chieh or a Chou, then there are no men in the world who achieve success—but this is not because their wisdom fails them. It is time and circumstance that make it so.

"To travel across the water without shrinking from the sea serpent or the dragon—this is the courage of the fisherman. To travel over land without shrinking from the rhinoceros or the tiger—this is the courage of the hunter. To see the bare blades clashing before him and to look upon death as though it were life—this is the courage of the man of ardor.<sup>15</sup> To understand that hardship is a matter of fate, that success is a matter of the times, and to face great difficulty without fear—this is the courage of the sage. Be content with it, Tzu Lu. My fate has been decided for me."

Shortly afterwards the leader of the armed men came forward and apologized. "We thought you were Yang Huo and

<sup>14</sup>The *Analec*s twice states (IX, 5; XI, 22): "The Master was put in fear in K'uang." It is said that the people of the state in which K'uang was situated, here identified as Sung, mistook Confucius for an enemy of theirs named Yang Huo.

<sup>15</sup>A man who is willing to sacrifice his life to save others or to preserve his honor.

that was why we surrounded you. Now that we see you aren't, we beg to take leave and withdraw."

Kung-sun Lung said to Prince Mou of Wei,<sup>16</sup> "When I was young I studied the Way of the former kings, and when I grew older I came to understand the conduct of benevolence and righteousness. I reconciled difference and sameness, distinguished hardness and whiteness, and proved that not so was so, that the unacceptable was acceptable. I confounded the wisdom of the hundred schools and demolished the arguments of a host of speakers. I believed that I had attained the highest degree of accomplishment. But now I have heard the words of Chuang Tzu and I am bewildered by their strangeness. I don't know whether my arguments are not as good as his, or whether I am no match for him in understanding. I find now that I can't even open my beak. May I ask what you advise?"

Prince Mou leaned on his armrest and gave a great sigh, and then he looked up at the sky and laughed, saying, "Haven't you ever heard about the frog in the caved-in well? He said to the great turtle of the Eastern Sea, 'What fun I have! I come out and hop around the railing of the well, or I go back in and take a rest in the wall where a tile has fallen out. When I dive into the water, I let it hold me up under the armpits and support my chin, and when I slip about in the mud, I bury my feet in it and let it come up over my ankles. I look around at the mosquito larvae and the crabs and polli-

<sup>16</sup>The logician Kung-sun Lung, who spent much time discussing the concepts of sameness and difference or the relationship of attributes such as hardness and whiteness to the thing they qualify, has already been referred to; see p. 35, n. 7, and p. 37, n. 9. Prince Mou of Wei was the reputed author of a Taoist work in four sections which is no longer extant.

wogs and I see that none of them can match me. To have complete command of the water of one whole valley and to monopolize all the joys of a caved-in well—this is the best there is! Why don't you come some time and see for yourself?

"But before the great turtle of the Eastern Sea had even gotten his left foot in the well his right knee was already wedged fast. He backed out and withdrew a little, and then began to describe the sea. 'A distance of a thousand li cannot indicate its greatness; a depth of a thousand fathoms cannot express how deep it is. In the time of Yü there were floods for nine years out of ten, and yet its waters never rose. In the time of T'ang there were droughts for seven years out of eight, and yet its shores never receded. Never to alter or shift, whether for an instant or an eternity; never to advance or recede, whether the quantity of water flowing in is great or small—this is the great delight of the Eastern Sea!'

"When the frog in the caved-in well heard this, he was dumfounded with surprise, crestfallen, and completely at a loss. Now your knowledge cannot even define the borders of right and wrong, and still you try to see through the words of Chuang Tzu—this is like trying to make a mosquito carry a mountain on its back or a pill bug race across the Yellow River. You will never be up to the task!

He whose understanding cannot grasp these minute and subtle words, but is only fit to win some temporary gain—is he not like the frog in the caved-in well? Chuang Tzu, now—at this very moment he is treading the Yellow Springs<sup>17</sup> or leaping up to the vast blue. To him there is no north or south—in utter freedom he dissolves himself in the four directions and drowns himself in the unfathomable. To him there is no east or west—he begins in the Dark Obscu-

<sup>17</sup> The underworld.

rity and returns to the Great Thoroughfare. Now you come niggling along and try to spy him out or fix some name to him, but this is like using a tube to scan the sky or an awl to measure the depth of the earth—the instrument is too small, is it not? You'd better be on your way! Or perhaps you've never heard about the young boy of Shou-ling who went to learn the Han-tan Walk. He hadn't mastered what the Han-tan people had to teach him when he forgot his old way of walking, so that he had to crawl all the way back home. Now if you don't get on your way, you're likely to forget what you knew before and be out of a job!"

Kung-sun Lung's mouth fell open and wouldn't stay closed. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and wouldn't come down. In the end he broke into a run and fled.

Once, when Chuang Tzu was fishing in the P'u River, the king of Ch'u sent two officials to go and announce to him: "I would like to trouble you with the administration of my realm."

Chuang Tzu held on to the fishing pole and, without turning his head, said, "I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Ch'u that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?"

"It would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud," said the two officials.

Chuang Tzu said, "Go away! I'll drag my tail in the mud!"

When Hui Tzu was prime minister of Liang, Chuang Tzu set off to visit him. Someone said to Hui Tzu, "Chuang Tzu



is coming because he wants to replace you as prime minister!" With this Hui Tzu was filled with alarm and searched all over the state for three days and three nights trying to find Chuang Tzu. Chuang Tzu then came to see him and said, "In the south there is a bird called the Yüan-ch'u—I wonder if you've ever heard of it? The Yüan-ch'u rises up from the South Sea and flies to the North Sea, and it will rest on nothing but the Wu-t'ung tree, eat nothing but the fruit of the Lien, and drink only from springs of sweet water. Once there was an owl who had gotten hold of a half-rotten old rat, and as the Yüan-ch'u passed by, it raised its head, looked up at the Yüan-ch'u, and said, 'Shoo!' Now that you have this Liang state of yours, are you trying to shoo me?"

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Chuang Tzu said, "See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!"

Hui Tzu said, "You're not a fish—how do you know what fish enjoy?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?"

Hui Tzu said, "I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're certainly not a fish—so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy!"

Chuang Tzu said, "Let's go back to your original question, please. You asked me *how* I know what fish enjoy—so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao."



## SUPREME HAPPINESS

(SECTION 18)

Is there such a thing as supreme happiness in the world or isn't there? Is there some way to keep yourself alive or isn't there? What to do, what to rely on, what to avoid, what to stick by, what to follow, what to leave alone, what to find happiness in, what to hate?

This is what the world honors: wealth, eminence, long life, a good name. This is what the world finds happiness in: a life of ease, rich food, fine clothes, beautiful sights, sweet sounds. This is what it looks down on: poverty, meanness, early death, a bad name. This is what it finds bitter: a life that knows no rest, a mouth that gets no rich food, no fine clothes for the body, no beautiful sights for the eye, no sweet sounds for the ear.

People who can't get these things fret a great deal and are afraid—this is a stupid way to treat the body. People who are rich wear themselves out rushing around on business, piling up more wealth than they could ever use—this is a superficial way to treat the body. People who are eminent spend night and day scheming and wondering if they are doing right—this is a shoddy way to treat the body. Man lives his life in company with worry, and if he lives a long while, till he's dull and doddering, then he has spent that much time worrying instead of dying, a bitter lot indeed! This is a callous way to treat the body.